



The design of three inaccessible courtyards in a new office building in Berne creates space for an elemental confrontation between time, materials and climate.

Time and the elements

Roland Raderschall

In landscape architecture, building simply was the rule in the past, because building materials and processes were natural, local and common. This all began to change during the 1950s, when concrete became popular, synthetics replaced natural building techniques, and tropical woods became standard for outdoor use. The use of these materials was taken for granted in day-to-day office work for many years. My own attitude changed some time in the 1980s, when Minimal and Conceptual Art became significant and the emerging environmental concerns began to make an impact.

Although we deprecated the Natural-garden Movement which arose in the Netherlands, Germany and Switzerland at the time, we nonetheless started asking ourselves if things could not be done more simply and 'honestly'. This meant, for example, not to clad a concrete wall with natural stones, not to use toxic colours, and to use raw rather than galvanised steel: working more simply led to more sustainable solutions as a side effect. Furthermore, 'working minimally' forced us to think more conceptually, stripping a project down to its essential content. For my own work, Ernest Hemingway's lapidary remark, 'It's hard to make a short sentence', became exemplary and helped to counter the louder temptations of Post-Modernism.

Today, 'building simply' is a definite commitment for various reasons. First, because we should deal with resources in a responsible, sustainable manner. And second, because our cities are loud in every respect: architecture, advertisements, traffic, signs of all kinds demand unceasing attention, so building simple places and gardens seems the more appropriate objective. And just to be clear: it's hard to design a simple garden.



2



3

- 1 Courtyard with tufa wall, one of the three courtyards at VZM, Verwaltungszentrum Ittigen, Berne
- 2 Medieval painting: a medieval garden, fenced in to protect it against the surrounding wilderness. Inside the garden, nature is cultivated and must follow man's desires
- 3 An archaic garden in Andalusia: a piece of enclosed land generates a little oasis in the badlands



4



5



6

Three courtyards for the VZM, Verwaltungszentrum Ittigen, Berne

At Ittigen on the outskirts of the City of Berne, the new Swiss Ministry for Environment, Traffic and Communication was built in 2005–06, to designs by GWJ Architects. Raderschall Landschaftsarchitekten were appointed to design the grounds and outside facilities following a design competition, and as this was the environmental ministry of the country a key idea was to build simply and sustainably. Simple and raw materials and solutions with rough detailing were sought for the extensive grounds of the complex of buildings: as many of the surfaces as possible were covered with gravel to absorb rainwater, and rock-filled gabions used as retaining walls.

One specific task was to design three internal courtyards for one of the buildings [1, 7, & 13]. These form part of the ventilation system and were not intended to be accessible, although they are highly visible from the corridors and offices on all levels. For their design we searched for a theme that could be varied, and one aim was to use simple, raw and maybe 'archaic' materials. The idea that emerged was to look on the three courtyards as transformations or, more accurately, inversions of the primal idea of the garden.

In several European languages the word 'garden' – *Jardin, Gard, Garten* – originally denoted a piece of fenced-in nature, within which only the rules of man counted [2&3]. Thus the inversion of this idea would mean to give a man-made construction back to the rules of nature. We wanted to initiate a process of natural transformation and then leave it alone. The variation of the theme would mean using three different, archaic materials that would react at different speeds and complexity to climate, water and sunlight.

The floors of the three spaces were filled with the same yellow chalkstone that was used around the outsides of the building. The way the stone was laid made clear that the places were not meant to be used, and then three volumes in different forms were inserted into the yards: a flat cuboid of turf (built using a manner traditional for turf walls in Iceland) [4&8], a tall cuboid of clay [5&9], and finally a wall of tufa stone [6&10]. The turf already had elements of



- | | | |
|--|--|--|
| 4 The turf volume: it starts to grow and develop immediately | 7 Landscape plan of the Verwaltungszentrum Ittigen: the building with the three courtyards is at the top left | layered in a traditional Icelandic manner |
| 5 The clay volume: immediately after construction no green shoots are yet visible | 8 The turf volume during construction. The turf tiles, gathered with special permission from a protected landscape in Switzerland, are | 9 The clay cuboid is built in several layers with different consistencies and colours |
| 6 The tufa-stone wall: it will take nature the longest time to recapture this construction | | 10 Little windows or gaps in the tufa wall will create small microclimatic zones and help plants to grow |

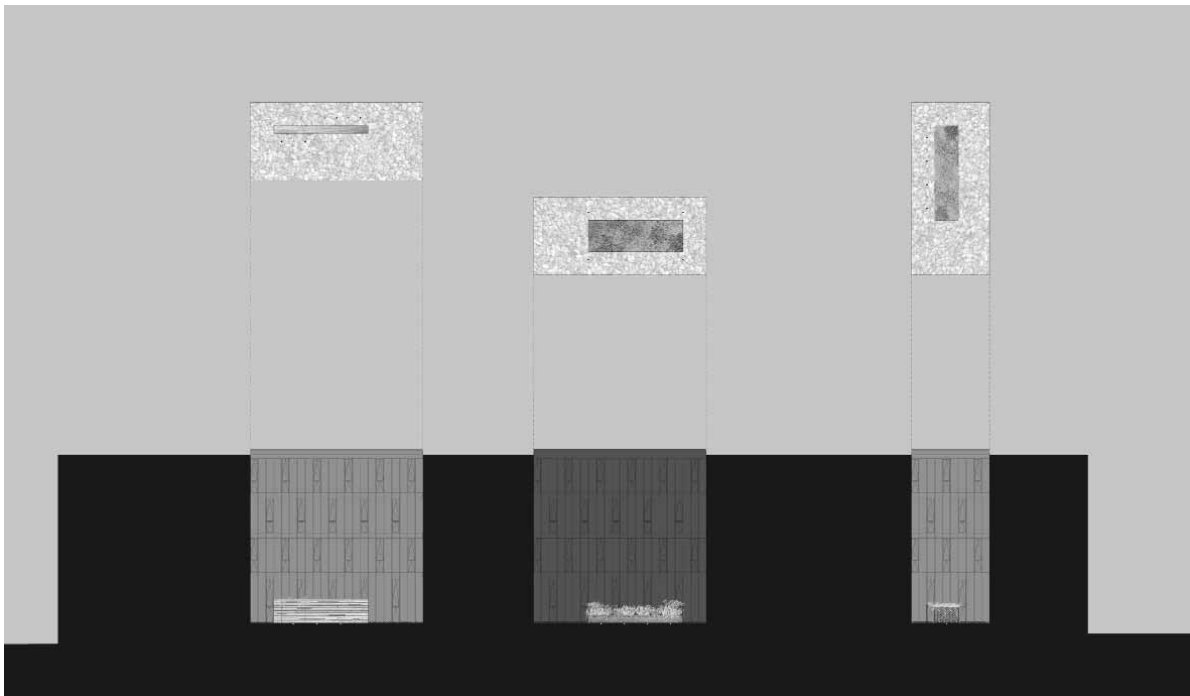


11



12

- 11 The clay volume with grass growing on top, a few months after completion
- 12 The tufa wall with one tiny little herb showing. Nature strikes back silently
- 13 Section through courtyards of Verwaltungszentrum Ittigen



13

living vegetation within it and started growing straight away and quickly, providing soil for higher plants. The clay contained seeds that would sprout and produce new seeds, so that the volume started greening slowly, but steadily. Finally, the tufa stone will soak up rain water and in its shady holes algae and mosses will start growing, reluctantly and sparsely scattered.

Despite the living material it supports, the turf cuboid will erode and lose its shape rather

quickly, and might end up as a brown heap with a birch tree on top. The clay volume will defend its shape against erosion much longer, but the sharp edges and clear form will slowly vanish under a cover of grasses [11], while the tufa wall will keep its shape for ever [12]. The bustling life of the office will thus be confronted with patterns of vegetation that grow and decay with stoic slowness, like living still lifes, three-dimensional, ever-changing pictures [13].

Illustration credits

arq gratefully acknowledges:
Author, all images

Office profile

Roland Raderschall founded Raderschall Landschaftsarchitekten in 1990 with Sibylle Aubert Raderschall. The office seeks innovative solutions for the ever-changing living and working conditions

in urban contexts, and frequently collaborates with architects, engineers, light- and industrial designers and artists. It has won some 25 competitions and a similar number of prizes, while the MFO-Park in Zurich, the Claramatte Park in Basel and the Garden Hunerwadel in Küsnacht have received national and international awards.

Author's address

Roland Raderschall
Raderschall
Landschaftsarchitekten
Burgstrasse 69
Meilen
Switzerland
www.raderschall.ch
info@raderschall.ch